Saskatchewan
Labour

Women's Division
1914 Hamilton Street
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WOMEN:

Employed and Unemployed

In Saskatchewan, as in Canada, there is an increase in the number of women entering the work force. Unemployment rates are also shooting up. This paper looks at the trends in employment and the increase in women's unemployment at a time when economic difficulties suggest a greater need for jobs.

A HISTORY

It is interesting to note that historically women have been among the first affected by fluctuations in the economy. Accordingly to Jane Humphries, in her paper "Women: Scapegoats and Safety Valves in the Great Depression,"[1] women's employment was already irregular* during the relatively prosperous years before the crash of 1929. She also notes that this irregularity grew along with the Depression.

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While women's employment was irregular in the early years of the Depression, the unemployment rate remained lower than that for men. This was due to the fact that women initially took the marginal and part-time jobs left alone by the unemployed men who were looking for a "decent wage." The Depression grew and women's unemployment exceeded that of men as competition for even marginal employment increased.

There was an attempt to blame women for the Depression. Political figures argued that "employment of married women took bread away from men" and that "the employment of mothers in industry" would bring the economic system "crashing down on our heads."[2]

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* Irregular: noticeable fluctuations in number of jobs available to women.

Humphries explains that the leaders of the American Federation of Labor collaborated with the monopolies for protection of skilled workers and agreed to do nothing to organize immigrants, blacks and women. Thousands of married women were discharged from the work force.[3]

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Here in Canada, some 50 years later, unemployment rates are again rising. According to The Leader-Post,[4] Canada Employment and Immigration has identified five trends with regard to women's unemployment:

1. A slowdown in manufacturing assembly and in personal services — jobs that have traditionally been held by women.

2 An increase in the participation of women in the labour force.

3. Women are viewed as secondary workers.

4. Women are the last hired and so the first fired.

5. An increase in cuts in education and social services — an area of high employment for women.

It has also been suggested that women's work is more stable[5] insofar as more new jobs have been created for women than for men.* However, the fact remains that women are swelling the ranks of the unemployed. The following table gives a picture of some of the changes.

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* For example, between September 1974 and September 1975, there were 383,000 new jobs; 253,000 for women 25 years old and over.

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1. Women - Employment,

Table 1

Women as a Percentage of the Labour Force and of the Unemployed for Selected Years [6]

Year	Women as Percent of the Labour Force	Women as Percent of the Unemployed
1955	22.7	17.2
1965	29.0	25.3
1975	36.9	43.3
1977	38.0	44.4
1979	39.3	46.1
Saskatchewan 1979	37.2	50.0

Table 1 shows that the unemployment rate of women over the past 25 years has surpassed their representation in the work force. That is, women make up a higher proportion of the unemployed than they do of the work force as a whole.

According to Statistics Canada[7], the Saskatchewan unemployment rate in 1979 for adult women was 5.4% compared to 3.4% for men. The unemployment rate for women between 15 and 24 years of age in Saskatchewan in 1979 was 8.9%[7]; however, the women in this age group may suffer unemployment as high as 30%.[8]

BLAMING IT ON WOMEN

The situation today is similar to the thirties when attempts were made to blame rising unemployment on women. But the facts reported by Sylvia Gelber,[9] special advisor to the federal Department of Labour, prove that women are <u>not</u> the cause.

According to Ms. Gelber, the highest unemployment for men is found in occupations where only about three percent of the female labour force is employed, for example, mining. The influx of women in the work force is being absorbed in expanding sectors such as service industries. Ms. Gelber also points out that men are generally not qualified for the jobs women are getting.

Dian Cohen,[10] Montreal economist, lends further support to Ms. Gelber's argument in pointing out that more than two of the three million women in the work force are in clerical, sales, service and professional groups. Half of the one million clericals are stenographers, typists or receptionists; two-thirds of the service workers are cooks, waitresses or hairdressers; and more than 60 percent of the half million professionals are school teachers or nurses.

Women are not the cause of unemployment and they are hit more severely than men by cutbacks in industry, a common source of unemployment at this time. One of the most recent instances of high unemployment can be found in the mining industry. Of INCO's 180 female mine and smelter workers in Sudbury, approximately 120 (two-thirds) were laid off. Compare this to the fact that only one-fifth of all employees were affected by the layoff.[11]

The suggestion that women are to blame for unemployment is in fact based on certain assumptions about woman's role in society. It assumes that women do not need to work; that they have no one to support; that there is a male present whose function is to be the sole breadwinner in the family. It is too often concluded from these erroneous assumptions that any woman who works is doing so for fun or pin money and is taking a job away from a man for the sake of a whim.

It has already been shown that the jobs women are working at are generally low paying and are not the jobs for which men typically apply. In addition, there is evidence that many women are in the work force because of financial need. Forty percent of women in the labour force in Canada in 1979 were single, widowed, divorced or separated, that is, self-supporting.[7] Cohen takes the argument further and points out that:

> ...women tend to go to work in order to support their husband's inadequate incomes. There is some evidence too that married women go to work when their husbands become unemployed.[12]

Given rising unemployment and a reduction in real wages,* one must expect an increase in the proportion of married women in the work force.

The following Statistics Canada figures substantiate the previous statements.[6]

	Married Women in Canada		
Year	Total	In Labour Force	
		Number	Percent
1965	4,255,000	1,073,000	25.2
1975	5,274,000	2,194,000	41.6
1979	5,577,000	2,643,000	47.4

In 1979 in Canada, 60 percent of the women in the labour force were married. This trend in labour force participation would seem to support the conclusion that one income in a family is, for a large number of people, no longer adequate.

The reality then is that women are not to blame for unemployment and that unemployment is as serious a burden for women as it is for men.

TRENDS IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Clearly, one trend in women's employment is the steady increase in the participation rate of women in the work force or the steady increase in the number of women who wish to work. Bonnie Fowke[13] suggests that we can reasonably expect almost six million women to be in the labour force by 1986. In 1979 there were 4.4 million women in the labour force[7] in Canada. If Fowke's estimate is correct, the increase will be significant, so significant that we need to ask where these women are going to find jobs.

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* Real wage: what money can actually buy. For example, if wages go up six percent and inflation goes up 12 percent, the new wage will actually buy less than before and so "real" wages have gone down.

Roderick Oram, journalist, in a series of articles published in The Financial Post,[14] suggests that there is also a trend towards a shortage in skilled labour. He notes a study of 15,207 tradesmen in Toronto, Hamilton and Guelph which showed that 87 percent were more than 40 years old. He suggests that the reason for the lack of trained workers to replace them is that industry has historically chosen to import skilled labour rather than provide the training at home.

One point which is important to keep in mind in examining such projections of labour shortage is whether or not these studies take into consideration the effects of layoffs, cutbacks, slowdowns and general economic malaise such as we are now experiencing. Oram seems to assume that all the positions vacated upon retirement will be available to a new worker. This is not always the case.

It is also important to note that Oram's article is based on the experience of Ontario, a province with a high concentration of industries. Saskatchewan may not show signs of any labour shortage for years after it appears in Ontario.

CONCLUSIONS

With rising unemployment, the question of limiting immigration and the importation of skilled labour is being addressed. However, the high cost of training may be used to justify continuation of the far less expensive practice of importing skill in the form of a controllable, immigrant labour force. There is no economic advantage for industry to consider training men and women in Canada, but there is an economic advantage in continuing to import to meet labour needs. How can the situation be reversed?

Because there will be a need for skilled labour in the future, consideration should be given now to changes in the apprenticeship system which might include accelerated pre-apprenticeship training, the provision of subsidies to employers if necessary to facilitate the employment of apprentices and the provision of childcare facilities in training institutions.

Traditional programs designed to curb unemployment have involved short term "make-work" projects such as Opportunities for Youth (OFY), job creation programs and capital expenditure programs designed to stimulate the economy by creating both a demand for materials as well as a demand for workers. None of these programs has seriously addressed the problems of women in the labour force and their high unemployment. The "make-work" projects do not leave participants with any new training or skills which can be used to get another job. The job creation and capital expenditure programs are generally geared to industries such as construction, transportation and communications, areas where women have not yet obtained skills or where women are not commonly hired. Given the high proportion of women seeking work, any program to solve the problem must take into consideration the particular situation of women in the work force.

Incentives could be provided to employers which would encourage them to finalize their decisions to cut production and lay off large numbers of employees only after consideration of the social and economic effects. The questions need to be asked: are the gains made by implementing such cuts absolutely necessary and do they outweigh the negative effects on society of having increasing numbers of workers, many of them women, looking for work?

Grace Hartman of the Canadian Union of Public Employees has been quoted as saying: "Pressure is being brought to bear on women to go back to their homes, to go back to their kitchens."[15] Such pressure is reminiscent of the alternatives proposed in the thirties; alternatives which proved ineffective even then.

The solution is not to be found in forcing segments of the population out of the job market. This only serves to discriminate against women and their right to hold a job. The right to obtain employment presumably applies to both women and men and any solution to unemployment should address the question for both.

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